

VI-Stones of Silence

Ladakh and Beyond

Shiv Kunal Verma

Sunday Guardian – 27 September (2339 words)



Royal scene inside the Dukhang Karpo (White Temple) at Hunder, Nubra built by King Tsewang Stanba around the 15th century; Zorawar Singh, Gulab Singh's general who led a military expedition into Zaskar and Ladakh in 1835 and then again in 1841. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

The Kiang, or the Tibetan Wild Ass (*Equus kiang*) whose small herds inhabit the area around Chushul and the Spangur Gap, shows a lot more common sense than the Chinese premier, Xi Jinping when it comes to identifying borders. The ass knows which area is controlled by the Indians and it roams freely there, while keeping well clear of PLA-held ground. The Chinese, their knives honed to salami slice territory, are also known to eat, among other things, the largest of the wild asses which otherwise harms no one, barely scrimping out an existence on the scarce montane and alpine grasslands of the high Himalayas.

The PLA, when it first came calling in Tibet and then Eastern Ladakh in the immediate decade preceding 1962, showed scant disregard for traditionally settled boundaries that had survived the test of time or any existing formal treaty for that matter. The then Chinese strong man, Chairman Mao, had already pulled off the largest land grab in the post WWII-era by bringing both Sinkiang and Tibet into the overall fold of the PRC, after which he decided to cut Nehru down to size in keeping with the age old Chinese saying that 'there cannot be two tigers on a hill'. Having completely misread Mao's devious intentions, the Indians then handed unto themselves a military defeat that then scared the nations psyche for the next five and a half decades creating an unequal relationship where the Chinese dragon repeatedly tries to bully the Indian elephant.

Travelling through the Shyok Valley in winter with Dr Sonam Wangchuk in 2011, we would try to wrap our heads around the topography of the surrounding area, which in the pre-satellite imagery days was a forbidding task. 'It is believed that in ancient times,

Ladakh might have been under Greater Tibet as part of *Zhangzhung* and *Ngar Skorsum* but ruled by local chieftains. But since the 10th Century it was always an independent kingdom until the Dogra invasion took place in 1835.' Sonam was from Khardung village and had been handpicked by the Rimpoche to do a Ph.D on Tibetan Buddhism and his knowledge of the area was formidable. We would climb into the remotest of places looking for royal inscriptions and paintings that few knew of. 'Inscription mentions King Bhagaram Mir,' he would say, while I would dutifully take photographs and file the information away. These little bits of information someday would help paint the larger picture, or so I hoped!

The area of ethnologic Tibet was close to 800,000 square miles, with the majority of the Tibetan population at the time living in the districts between Lhasa and the Chinese border. Not only was the altitude a factor, the harshness of the terrain served to isolate it not just from India to the south, but also China to the east and Mongolia to its north. The devastating hordes of Mongols that poured through Central Asia and reduced the Russians and half of Europe to vassalage never entered Tibet, even though it lay at their very doorstep. Even when they attacked India, they chose to swing around Tibet and entered the subcontinent through the easier passes of Afghanistan.

Given the nature of the terrain, the Indo-Tibet boundary was always going to be a problem. Apart from its vastness—extending from the Karakorams in the west to the area beyond the Lohit River in the east—the actual demarcation could never be done. Both the Tibetans and the peoples living in various kingdoms to the south, rarely followed geographical features being content to confine themselves to the more practical method of separating territories by need. For example, the Tibetans were more interested in the higher reaches for grazing their yaks and flocks of upland sheep, while those in the relatively lower areas would base their claim on the vegetation that grew there. This system worked well until the beginning of the 20th century, until surveyors and cartographers armed with modern mapping gadgets, began to delineate frontiers on geographical lines.

The frontiers also remained relatively ill-defined because governmental control in Tibet was fairly fluid. Given the fact that both the Chinese and the British were constantly probing and pushing their frontiers forward, it was perhaps inevitable that there would be serious differences in opinion. In subsequent years, it would be a great irony that the PRC would on behalf of Tibet, lay claim to areas that the Tibetans themselves had conceded as not being a part of political Tibet.

The frontier between Ladakh and Tibet can be traced back to the 10th century when a Tibetan prince, Skyid-Ida-Ngeemagon, conferred the Meryal (Ladakh) fief to his eldest son. Since then, various kings ruled over Ladakh. In 1681 and 1683, the Tibetans aided by Mongols invaded Ladakh. Subsequently, in 1684 a peace treaty between the two sides was concluded that read: 'The boundaries fixed in the beginning, when Skid-Ida-Ngeemagon gave a kingdom to each of his three sons, should still be maintained.'

After Mao's intervention, the Chinese started to question the existence of any such treaty. Peking further claimed that: 'Skyid-Ida-Ngeemagon conferred fiefs on each of his three sons only reflects a change in ownership of manorial estates among feudal lords of Tibet at that time. The three sons of the prince each took his share of fiefs

from the united Skyid-Ida-Ngeemagon dominions, and Meryal at that time was a small state.' The Chinese then conclude: 'Therefore, the question of delimiting the boundary between Ladakh and Tibet as between two countries does not arise.'

The main bone of contention in later years with the Chinese is the boundary that extends eastwards from the Karakoram Pass to the Changchenmo valley that lies to the south. This was the traditional line that divided the Ladakh region from Sinkiang and Tibet, both of whom came under Communist China's control after Mao came to power. On the other hand, India claims the huge expanse of the Aksai Chin that lies south of the Kuen Lun Mountain range as an integral part of its territory. The entire zone is a vast high altitude desert with huge salt lakes at heights in the region of 5,000m. Geographically though part of the Tibetan Plateau and the Chang Tang, the region is almost uninhabited and sees little precipitation due to the Himalayan and other mountains to the south soaking up the Indian monsoon. Historically, however, the 38,000 sq km Aksai Chin was considered to be a part of the Kingdom of Ladakh even when it was officially annexed by Kashmir in 1846.

Leaving the Aksai Chin to the north, the boundary then drops south from the Changchenmo valley to Spiti which is today a part of Himachal Pradesh. This line passes through Pangong Tso, Chushul and Demchok. The entire frontage for the western section is over 1,610 kilometres and this entire region has continuously been a part of Ladakh for close to a thousand years. Gulab Singh's mercurial rise under Maharaja Ranjit Singh had made the 1835 Dogra expedition under Zorawar Singh into the trans-Himalayan region an important event whose ramifications were felt in the Lahore Durbar. After crossing Umasi-la and getting to Padam, Zorawar had then moved westwards, capturing the Suru River Valley and the small town of Kargil. In the next four years, he had the entire region of Ladakh and Baltistan under his control.

Once again in 1841, Zorawar Singh crossed back into Ladakh. His 5,000 strong army supplemented by another 2,000 men from Kishtwar, Ladakh and Baltistan advanced eastwards along the Indus river and brushed aside all Tibetan opposition at Rudok and Tashigong. By September the Dogras had set up base at Taklakot near the Mansarovar Lake where they hastily constructed a small fort. This location was 15 miles from the borders of Nepal and Kumaon. Both the king of Nepal and the British governor of the North West Province (later United Provinces, then Uttar Pradesh and later still, Uttarakhand) sent their emissaries to meet with Zorawar Singh. The British had been viewing the Dogra advance with alarm; from their point of view a direct link between Lahore (the Sikhs) and Nepal (the Gorkhas) was most undesirable, and they had been putting relentless pressure on the Lahore Durbar to press Gulab Singh to recall Zorawar Singh and vacate the Tibetan territory occupied by him.

However, by then, Zorawar Singh had already shot his bolt. The intense cold and lack of supplies had virtually immobilized his army and to make matters worse, the Tibetans, aware of the threat to Lhasa, had put together a large force to neutralize the Dogras. Boldly seeking to engage the Tibetans rather than sit back and wait for them to attack him, the Dogras were overcome at Toyu on 11/12 December, 1841 at an altitude of over 16,000 feet. Zorawar Singh himself died fighting. Very few survivors from this ill-fated campaign escaped into British Kumaon.

Gulab Singh's prestige was severely dented by the demise of Zorawar Singh and his army, and to make matters worse, the Tibetan Army was now advancing on Ladakh. A force under the command of Dewan Hari Chand was rushed from Jammu to Chushul where it convincingly crushed the Tibetans, thereby avenging the defeat at Toyu. In September 1842, Diwan Hari Chand and Wazir Ratnu on behalf of Gulab Singh signed a peace treaty with Kalon Surkhan and Depon Pishy who represented the Tibetan Government. This treaty 'as recognized by both sides since olden times,' accepted the traditional boundary between Ladakh and Tibet. The village and area around Minsar near Mansarover Lake that was held by the Rajas of Ladakh since 1583 were, however, retained by the Jammu and Kashmir maharajas and till 1948 they continued to receive the revenue from Minsar that lies hundreds of miles inside Tibet. This treaty of 1842 settled the boundary between Ladakh and Tibet in unequivocal terms leaving no cause for any kind of border dispute in this region. Or so it was thought!

The Treaty itself was in three separate, but essentially identical, versions; one each between Tibet and Ladakh, another between their principals, the Sikh Durbar and China. The Persian text in Tibet's possession reads: 'We shall remain in possession of the limits of boundaries of Ladakh and the neighbours subordinate to it, in accordance with the old customs, and there shall be no transgression and no interference in the country beyond the old-established frontiers.' The Tibetan text in Kashmir's possession was of the same tenor.

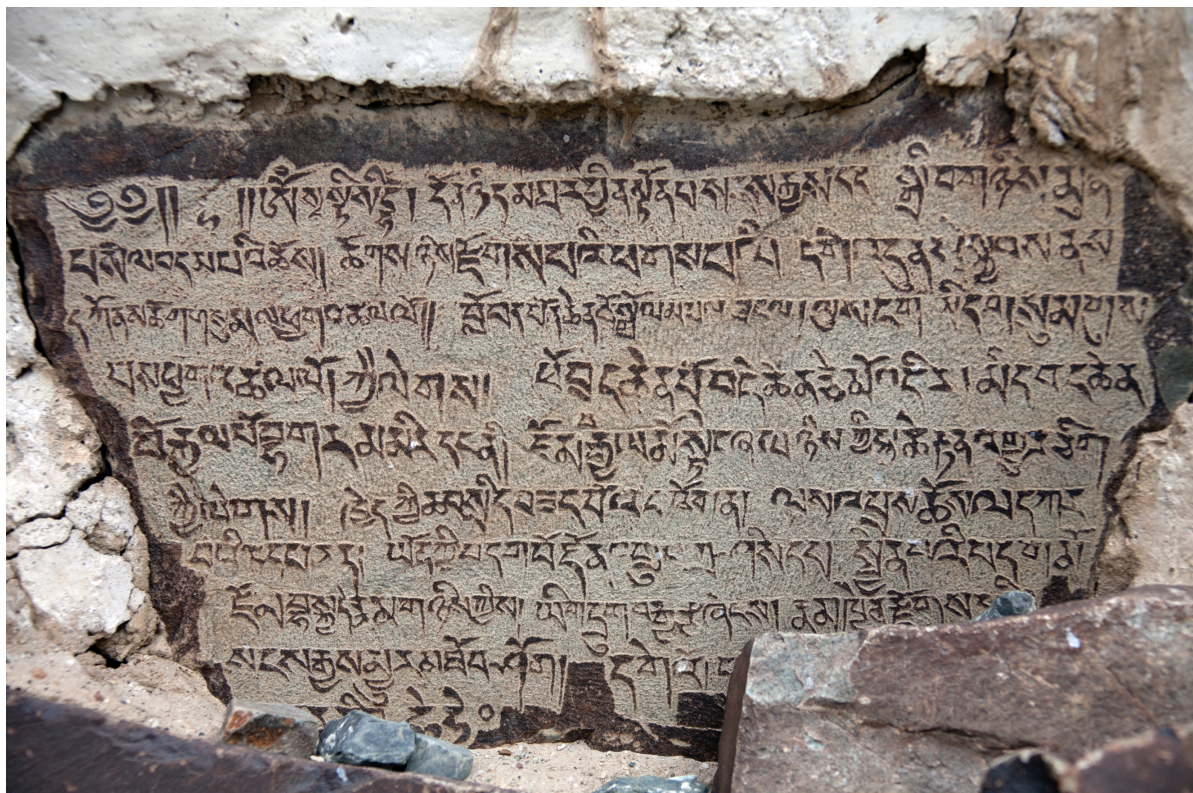
After the Amritsar Treaty formally created the kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir, the British abrogated to themselves the responsibility for Kashmir's northern and eastern borders with Sinkiang and Tibet. The first British attempt in 1847, Cunningham's Ladakh Border Commission, failed to delineate the eastern border between Ladakh and Tibet and the northern boundaries between Kashmir and Xinjiang, which left the British no choice but to rely on the earlier treaty of 1842 which the Chinese would later contest on the grounds that it had more to do with non-aggression rather than the delineation of the boundary.

So what then were the old established frontiers? Much has been written about the survey conducted by William Henry Johnson in 1865 whose main task was to draw the line from Demchok in the south to the 18,000 feet high Karakorum pass in the north. Some claim Johnson's border took a circuitous route beyond the Kuen Lun Mountains and thus included the barren and cold Aksai Chin desert into the political map of Kashmir, but in reality he was only following the established boundaries of Ladakh that already existed. To complicate matters, Johnson resigned his job and was appointed by the Maharaja of Kashmir as the Governor of Ladakh. This move gave his critics the ammunition they needed to rubbish his map-making abilities on the ground that Johnson had included the vast territory of the Aksai Chin to cosy up to the Maharaja who was obviously pleased as punch to see the size of his state increase dramatically. Johnson on his part had been fairly meticulous—besides overseeing transportation and advice on the routes, Johnson himself travelled right up to Shahidula. In 1878, when the Chinese once again established their control over Sinkiang, they created a customs post north of Shahidula implying that they considered the Kuen Lun as outside their jurisdiction.

Almost half a century later, the British Minister to China, Sir Claude MacDonald, again tried to address the boundary issue, suggesting the demarcation of the frontier

between Sinkiang and Tibet with Ladakh. Once again China refused to accept the proposal. Subsequently, the Chinese would point to the MacDonald proposal as proof that none of the earlier arguments held any water as the proposal itself proved that the boundary had not been delineated. However, on closer scrutiny, the MacDonald proposal was a major deviation from the earlier established boundary. The new proposal, in fact, drew a line from the Karakoram Pass towards the east that differed from any Indian or British map of that time. Ironically, the MacDonald line would have placed more than half of the Aksai Chin in Chinese territory.

Unfortunately, post-Independence, India's getting embroiled in an inconclusive shooting match with Pakistan over Kashmir, further complicated matters. Pakistani tribal *lashkars*, apart from making a grab for Srinagar, also made a determined grab for Ladakh, the invaders getting to the outskirts of Leh itself. With the Pakistan factor also coming into play, the Sino-Indian boundary became even more complicated. Five years were to pass after Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India in 1947 before the Chinese moved into the Aksai Chin area, which had been left unguarded. At that time India's boundaries in Eastern Ladakh were based on Johnson's map. But matters had moved on, for by the time India sent a patrol into the Western Karakorams to show the flag, the G-219 Highway, the main link to the Karakoram Highway, had already been constructed by the Chinese. And then of course 1962 happened, and ever since has continued to be split over differing Chinese Claim Lines!



A royal inscription engraved on stone at Hunder in the Shyok Valley which mentions King Bhagaram Mir. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

Shiv Kunal Verma is the author of the highly acclaimed **1962: The War That Wasn't** and **The Long Road to Siachen: The Question Why**.

